

2 April 1986

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2 April 1986Terrorism: Separating the Threat from the Reality

There is clearly a sharp disconnect between the vast amount of data flowing into intelligence and security agencies daily on potential imminent terrorist acts, and the number of incidents which ever actually happen. Why this is the case has important implications for our counter-terrorist analysis and operations and for our broader political analysis of countries supporting terrorism.

We all see on a daily basis quantities of raw reporting on a multitude of potential terrorist activity: reports of terrorist contacts made, plans hatched, ideas proposed, groups trained, groups dispatched, orders given, casings undertaken, groups travelling, public threats made, etc. The vast majority of this fortunately never takes place.

But the perception of the political analyst, the policymaker, and the public is increasingly clouded by the growing volume of terrorist data entering the system, suggesting the imminence of carnage world-wide directed against the US and its allies.

- The counter-terrorist analyst must obviously treat with extreme seriousness any and all of these reports and threats.
- The political analyst and policymaker, however, is simply left with a barrage of raw reporting which suggests that the world not only is very dangerous, but that massive mayhem and violence is about to break out every day. This directly affects--even clouds--our political perceptions on what a number of hostile states are really up to and capable of doing. These clouded perceptions hinder our ability to make accurate forecasts of probable behavior.
- Iran, for example, reportedly is training on a regular basis large numbers of terrorists. It issues threats to its neighbors periodically.
- Yet, we see very little correlation between the number of terrorists supposedly being trained and the number of incidents which ever take place. The Persian Gulf has been singularly quiet and relatively free of terrorist incidents against almost anyone for the last two years--precisely during the time of pressure on Iran during the Gulf War which caused us to predict with some certainty that Iran would be pulling out all the stops on terrorist activity against the US and Iran's Arab enemies.

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Why--mercifully--does only a tiny proportion of these terrorist plans ever come off?

- Are these states actually training as many terrorists as our reporting would cause us to believe?
- Why are the terrorists who are trained not carrying out operations?
- How much direct control does Iran, Libya, and Syria have over those they have trained, funded or supported? How quickly can they press the "terrorist button" in a given country under given circumstances and get quick results?
- What are the true capabilities of these states in terrorism? Are the threats really growing or is our intelligence simply getting better?
- Are reporting elements down the line, world-wide, over-ensuring by reporting every rumor, etc., with too little quality control?
- Do many terrorist acts not occur because local police are becoming increasingly effective in getting on top of these groups and activities?
- Are US counterterrorist activities increasingly effective in spiking these groups? Is police and intelligence service coordination vastly improved?
- Are the terrorists themselves growing more prudent and cautious in not striking until they are sure the operation is right?
- How much are states hostile to the US engaging in "disinformation" deception and political action attempting to make the US and the world believe that the wrathful masses are about to unleash a sea of blood against the US imperialists?
- In the last few days we are getting reporting that Libya, in a very heavy-handed and public way, is "casing" neighborhoods overseas for the residences of American diplomats. We must take these threats extremely seriously and be alert to protecting our people. But how much of this is true terrorism and how much is psychological warfare? If it is psychological warfare, isn't it perhaps even more dangerous for us in that it may be glutting our information systems with noise which makes it yet harder to discern the real threats?

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-- Are terrorist groups getting orders to carry out certain operations and then deciding to disobey orders? Do they have increasing independence themselves to make the call about when they will move and when they won't?

-- In short, why don't most of these operations come off?

A systematic examination of reporting, analysis, and CT operations would:

- Allow us to gauge statistically just what proportion of these threats actually tend to come off--especially those related to high profile countries such as Libya.
- Gauge the amount of "flak" or "noise" entering the system from reporting which often may be ill-founded or poorly sourced.
- Enable us to get a better statistical handle the factors that seem to cause these terrorist plans to abort or be dropped.
- Enable us to try to establish a correlation between threats and action for differing countries or groups--which may tell us more about the real political intentions of these countries and organizations as opposed to the rhetoric. E.g., is Libya largely bluff? Is Syria quieter but more effective?
- Enable us to better identify psychological and even disinformation campaigns against us which clog our ability to perceive the real thing. (If I were a terrorist I would be busy phoning in threat reports and tips all the time.)

The answers are obviously not simple. They will vary very much with the country, the terrorist group, the nationality, the locale in which they are operating, etc. Yet we need to ask these analytic questions and assess the political implications of the answers as well as the counter-terrorist and operational aspects of the problem.

- Some of these answers may help us to more truly gauge the kind of threat we are up against, and suggest where we can better devote resources. It may tell us more about the nature of those hostile threats operating against us--not to downplay the threat or the degree of their hostility, but to see it in clearer perspective.

Clearly these are problems which must have occurred to most counter-terrorist analysts already. These analysts may have a good sense for the answers but the policymakers do not. There would be real value in a broader study using statistical data designed to treat the problem

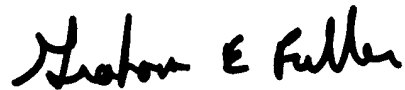
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generically. Otherwise I fear that counter-terrorist intelligence is going to be a growth industry which will cause us to lose almost all perspective of the problem, both politically and operationally.

The flow of excellent warning that we get daily almost suggests that it is dangerous to take a plane or enter a US Embassy anywhere in the world. Happily this is not the statistical reality--and won't be, even if Libyan-inspired terrorist acts do increase in the near future. Where is the disconnect and what does it tell us?



Graham E. Fuller